R2P: A UN Norm For Mass Atrocity Prevention

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The United Nations Security Council is often criticised for its inability to reach consensus on critical issues. Yet, Resolution 2781, adopted on 30 May 2025, represents a rare success in multilateral cooperation. The UN norm "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) was invoked in South Sudan as fighting intensified. Despite demonstrated consensus, what are the challenges to meaningful action?

Understanding R2P

R2P is a norm within the framework of the UN aimed at protecting populations from mass atrocities — genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. Norms are widely accepted standards that guide how states act, though they are not legally binding. R2P was adopted at the UN World Summit in 2005 in response to the failures to prevent mass atrocities in the 1990s. This framework to address mass violence imposes a responsibility to act when mass atrocities are foreseeable. It redefines sovereignty as a responsibility. When states fail to protect their populations from mass atrocities, that responsibility may shift to the international community through R2P.

In 2009, R2P adopted a three-pillar strategy for actionable atrocity prevention. Pillar one imposes a duty on states to protect their populations from mass atrocities. Pillar two encourages international assistance through third-party mediators, training domestic security forces, and preventive diplomacy (reminding governments of protection obligations). Pillar three calls for collective action if a state fails to protect its population through economic and diplomatic sanctions, UN peacekeeping operations, and military intervention.

Challenges and Criticism

At first glance, it may seem as though pillar three of R2P contradicts Article 2.7 of the UN charter, which declares that the UN is legally unauthorized to intervene in the domestic affairs of member states. However, Article 7 cites an exception — the Security Council may intervene if action is necessary

to maintain international peace. If coercive action is deemed necessary, a member of the council will propose a resolution that lists specific measures to be taken. To pass, the resolution requires nine votes and no permanent member vetoes, after which military operations may be carried out by UN peacekeepers or authorised regional coalitions. Though the Security Council may agree that action is justified and necessary, a key question arises: if mass atrocities occur within a state, how does intervention in that state's domestic affairs "maintain international peace"? With mass atrocities often comes displaced persons, regional instability, and regimes that pose risks to neighbouring states. R2P assumes that mass atrocities increase regional security risks, justifying intervention in a state's domestic affairs to prevent the plausible disruption of international peace.

Though R2P follows UN legislation, it is not uncontested in the international sphere. Concerns have arisen about the Security Council's ability to intervene in states' domestic affairs, especially militarily. UN legislation is largely based on Western legal traditions, including views on sovereignty. R2P is controversial: some states claim it legalises neo-imperialism while others claim it lacks a clear framework for action. As global crises mount, will R2P remain a dormant ideal or become a renewed call to action?

Further Reading Recommendation

Levinger, M. (2024). Revivifying the responsibility to protect: Strengthening the normative consensus for atrocity prevention. Genocide Studies and Prevention, 18(1), 190-211. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol18/iss1/14/

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